FAITH FOR THE FUTURE
Luke 9:28-36
Numbers 13:1-3, 26-14:4
February 27, 1983

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I was fortunate to be one of the people to spend an evening last week listening to an 87 year old physicist, architect, mathematician, philosopher reflect on the human condition and the human prospect.

Buckminster Fuller was in town: inventor of the Geodesic Dome, brilliant intellectual who sees more clearly and more deeply than most of us, a true futurist, a man celebrated internationally for thinking and speaking about spaceship earth..

Near the end of a remarkable two-hour presentation, Fuller began to talk about the future. We are on the brink of an era of unimagineable progress, he said. We are capable of a peacefully, fulfilling, human future. We have the tecnhology, Fuller said - we know how - now to feed, clothe, and shelter humanity... The problem is that our technology, our steel, our resources, our brain trusts and think tanks are tied up. Since World War II, the inhabitants of spaceship earth have invested seven trillion dollars in the project of perfecting the capability of killing all life in 30 minutes.

God, Fuller said, is trying very hard to make a success out of humanity. Human beings, he said, are sitting for final exams....to determine whether or not they were a good invention. To survive - we must decide to survive, he said, and he concluded very poignantly, I thought, by rasping "I hope you make it."

Sometimes the past seems altogether more inviting than the future. Sometimes nostalgia seems more appropriate and feels more pleasant than anticipation. Sometimes it seems that the best any of us can do is cling tightly to some reality out of the past - the nation's, our community's, our social group's, or our own personal past, and force that piece of history to retain its identity and power in an increasingly alien present and almost forboding future.

I sat in a meeting two weeks ago with several Presbyterians from Michigan, Kentucky, and Ohio. We had been asked by our Synod to discuss and make recommendations on a relatively complex matter...The discussion was lively: it was the consensus of all that the problem is a new one for us. It didn't exist twenty years ago. Near the end of the meeting one of the participants said something so interesting that I wrote it down. He said: "I live in two worlds. and I'm tempted for the years I have left in this life - which really aren't many - to stay in the old world and just not deal with the complexity of the new world: abortion, nuclear weapons, multinational corporations: marriage and family deteriorating, long-term unemployment in industrial cities. I'm too old for any of it and I wish I could just retreat into my old life."

He didn't mean it, of course, but we all laughed knowingly, particularly me - because I had just chosen a text for this Sunday and my friend sounded for all the world like a latter-day Israelite peering into the promised land, wishing he could go back to the safety of Egyptian slavery.

have suggested - he translates "poor:" into "poor in spirit". In any event, it seems fair to conclude that Jesus did not reject wealthy people simply because they were wealthy. Yet he clearly seemed to have a preference for poverty, for poor people. He spent most of his life among them. They, in his way of seeing things, are the blessed - the truly happy - which is what the Greek word means. The poor, throughout the Bible are God's favorites. And determining the reason why is a scholarly project of long duration.

"The poor people heard him gladly", the New Testament says. What he said was good news for them. He was one of them. Some have suggested that Jesus preferred poverty because it was his own experience. His home was poor: his parents and their friends were poor. Historians point out that with the exception of the elite, all the people of the world at the time of Christ, spent nearly all their time working on the basic problems of survival: food, shelter, and clothing. And so, while he seemed comfortable enough with people of all stations, Jesus knew personally, what it meant to be poor.

More to the point, scholars suggest that Jesus' affection for the poor, came from the attitudes, the world view, which always seems to accrue to the not-poor the affluent. Walter Russell Bowie, commenting on this passage years ago wrote: "He never condemned wealth as such, but he saw how wealth might encase men in a hard shell of their seeming sufficiency so that they were no longer sensitive to the spiritual values of life." (Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8, p. 117)

Self-sufficiency, the sense that one needs no-one, is near the heart of the matter here. And nowhere is that subject more eloquently explored than in those marvelous New Yorker cartoons: gently puncturing the self-sufficient posturing of the affluent: the cigar chomping tycoon surveying his vast manufacturing plant from his elegant office window, and saying something like "you may not be able to serve God and mammon but it doesn't hurt to have a little back for a rainy day."; the chairman of the board, presiding in front of a dismal sales chart and saying "All in favor of a stiff upper lip say Aye." It's not wealth that is evil: it is the attitude toward life which it seems to foster. I was delighted to discover a quotation from Martin Luther - 450 years old. He wrote: "Rich folk's children seldom turn out right. They are complacent, arrogant, and conceited, and think they need to learn nothing because they think they have enough to live on." (ibid.) Theology, philosophy, sociology have always understood that self-sufficiency can be the enemy of human relations.

The futurists, interestingly, are warning us that we have elevated the idea of self-sufficiency and personal independence to the level of religious truth and that it will do us in if we do not alter it. That will not be easy because the self-sufficient, totally independent, lone individual, needing no one, has always been a kind of ideal for us. And the dream of a nation, totally independent, totally self-sufficient, while true for us for a brief time, is not true now and never will be true again.

There are major obstacles ahead of us. Sometimes they appear gigantic. And the moment we, as individual citizens, conclude that compared to those problems we're like grasshoppers, we have lost faith in the future, in fact, just plain lost faith in any meaningful sense whatever.

There are obstacles ahead of this church. Sometimes they appear gigantic. We have set some goals and we are privileged today to celebrate the accomplishment of those goals. It is a time for gratitude and as much pride as seems decent and orderly. But, as we peer across the border, into the future, there are some giants up ahead. There is a neighborhood, which while looking and feeling a little better than it did, is still full of sub-standard houses, and unemployed people, mostly black people and mostly young. It is still a city which proclaims us public policy that the care of the homeless indigent is not a matter for public concern, but private charity - which means quiet and discreet, which means out of sight. There are more hungry people out there than ever, and if you read the same newspapers as I do you know that the hunger and unemployment aren't going to change much in the near future. When the smoke clears from all our celebrating this week, we will still be a downtown church, in a time and place which is not kind to downtown institutions.. When this day is over, we will still be here, perched on this corner, surrounded by vacant lots, marginal business and lots of crime, with a century-old building and contrary roof and inadequate heating system. But, thank God, people who were here before many of us were born decided that this church would stand here whatever the future brought.

J. Harry Cotton, the pastor from 1928 until 1940, wrote a very enthusiastic letter to me in January of 1982. He was delighted that his old church, just when inflation and interest were soaring and unemployment increasing: just when prudence would seem to dictate hunkering down, cutting back, and playing it close, decided to rebuild. It reminded him of 1937, he said, "when our repairs had hardly started it became clear that the building would extend up to the property lines. So I went to Mrs. Orton, she lived in a house where the present education building stands, and asked her to give me for two dollars an option to but her property for $30,000. She agreed. She really wanted the church to have that land. The option was about to run out. The Board of Trustees was reluctant to buy, for we had already obligated ourselves for almost $200,000 and the money for that had not been raised. So when Jack Hislop saw what was happening, he was a member of the Board, he asked, 'Would you men mind if I picked up that option.' Everyone knew that he was one of the sharpest real estate men in the city and if he wanted the land, then the church should buy it. and they did - and saved the future life of the church!"

So today, as we dedicate these facilities, we are in a sequence, a tradition of walking into the future with courage and hope. They were $200,000 in the hole, hadn't raised it yet, and had enough vision to purchase a piece of property. And without that purchase, my guess is that this church would never have survived into the 1970's.

There are giants up ahead! Who among us hasn't felt like that personally? Robert M. Hutchins, legendary Chancellor of the U. of C. used to advise students: "Get ready for anything, because anything is what's going to happen." (Martin Marty, By Way of Response, p. 138) The future: its

sufficient global power. For a moment, we needed no one. The day is long gone, but the mentality isn't. Naisbitt has written a good chapter on the World Economy in Megatrends which is very informative, particularly for those who see our economic future in terms of restoring the good old days of swashbuckling independence. We are no longer number one in terms of living standards, for instance. We trail Sweden, Denmark, West Germany, Switzerland. (p. 57) The economics of the nations of the world, in the meantime, are intimately related and very dependent on one another. For instance "Ford's world car, The Escort, is being put together in the United States, Britain, and Germany from parts made in Spain, Italy, Japan, and Brazil;.....90% of the baseball mitts used in the great American pasttime are made in Japan. But they are made from American cowhide, which is shipped to Brazil for tanning before it goes to Japan to be made into mitts." (p. 67)

The point is that in terms of the life of the whole world, the peace of the world, self-sufficiency is a liability and dependence on one another is an asset. Naisbitt suggests that the best hope for world peace is a thoroughly interdependent world economy.

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." The Gospel of Jesus Christ is tilted in the direction of the poor. And the reason is that the affluent seem to forget how to be human. Thus the historic flirtation with poverty as a moral good, in and of itself. St. Francis of Assissi demonstrated the sheer, unadultered potential of humanity apart from riches. And, of course, the monastic orders adopted vows of poverty which, it was assumed, was a holy and good thing to do. The Bible itself, is warmly and compassionately interested in poor people. Sometimes it is righteously angry at injustice and the exploitation of the poor by the rich. There is no getting away from that in the Bible. The Old Testament prophets railed against the gap between rich and poor and urged the whole nation to assume the burden for the care of one another. Jesus echoed that and there is a sense in which the whole Gospel story is told from the perspecstive of the poor, the weak, the social outcast. Not to understand that about Christianity is to miss something fundamental about the entire enterprise. To expect Christians not to care about economic justice in the Third World, simply because Marxist revolutionaries line up on the same side - is to exhibit an incredible naivete. One wishes the people at Reader's Digest would simply read the Bible and then call the folks over at "60 Minutes" and tell them what it says.

It is good news for the poor. It is not a prescription for social reorganization. Economic justice is not synonymous with the redistribution of wealth according to Marxist formula. But the Bible is concerned about poor people, and it celebrates some characteristics of poor people which wealthy people have a tendency to lose in the process of becoming wealthy.

Simplicity, for instance: the ability to be happy, within oneself, instead of as a result of owning things: a sense of one's humanness, one's potential and gifts as well as one's limits: and, above all, a sharpened sense of interdependence, a willingness to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that people need people in order to be human - and happy: that to be wealthy and alone is to be very, very poor.